

Buffalo Soldiers

Guardians of California National Parks



Although African American soldiers have fought in America’s wars since the Revolution, they were not permitted to enlist in the Regular Army until Reconstruction. By 1869, Congress had established four all-black regiments: the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 24th and 25th Infantry. The soldiers of these regiments would become known as the Buffalo Soldiers.

The salary, \$13 per month, was low for the 1870s, but still paid better than the menial jobs commonly available to African Americans. Moreover, the military provided a dignity not typically afforded by civilian life.

How the Buffalo Soldiers Got Their Name

According to legend, Native Americans called the troopers “buffalo soldiers” because their dark, curly hair resembled a buffalo’s coat. The Native Americans revered the buffalo for its fierce bravery and fighting spirit, so the nickname can also be considered a sign of respect. The soldiers accepted the title with pride and honor.

Indian Wars

Following the Civil War, the U.S. turned its attention to developing the American frontier. The Buffalo Soldiers fought in campaigns against native tribes, pursued bandits, improved roads, escorted the mail, scouted and mapped. Their work to secure the frontier was performed in the face of hostile conditions, not only in terms of extreme climates and terrain but also significant racial tension.

Cover from left to right: 9th Cavalry in Yosemite, 1904. NPS; Unidentified cavalry in forest. NPS; 9th Cavalry in Yosemite, 1903. Courtesy of the Nevelle Hawkins Silliman Collection; Buffalo soldier on Giant Forest Road, Sequoia 1903. Courtesy of the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center. Wilberforce, Ohio.

In Cuba & the Philippines

After the U.S. declared war on Spain in 1898, Buffalo Soldier troops went to Cuba. They fought in the Battle of San Juan Hill alongside white regiments and Theodore Roosevelt’s volunteer “Rough Riders.” The Spanish-American War presented a conflicted situation for African American soldiers, in which they fought on behalf of their country abroad yet lacked equal rights at home.

After Spain’s defeat, an insurgent movement emerged in the U.S.-occupied Philippines. All four Buffalo Soldier regiments participated in the ensuing Philippine Insurrection. The troops began to return in 1902, passing through San Francisco to their new assignments, which included garrison duty at the Presidio and guard duty at Yosemite, Sequoia and General Grant (Kings Canyon) National Parks.



Member of the 24th Infantry on mounted patrol in Yosemite, 1899. NPS, Yosemite Research Library.



Cavalry encampment, likely en route to Sequoia National Park, 1903. Photograph from the collection of Charles Young. Courtesy of the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, Wilberforce, Ohio

The Army in the National Parks

Before the creation of the National Park Service in 1916, the Army was responsible for patrolling Yellowstone, Sequoia, and Yosemite—our first national parks. They protected the lands for the enjoyment of visitors and laid the foundations for the future national park system. Beginning in 1891, soldiers spent the summer blazing trails, constructing roads, creating maps, evicting grazing livestock, extinguishing fires, monitoring tourists, and keeping poachers and loggers at bay. The soldiers’ expeditionary frontier experience, as well as their sense of responsibility and service, lent itself toward duty in the parks.

The Buffalo Soldiers patrolled the parks during three summers, entrusted with the same duties as the units that preceded and followed them. In 1899, the 24th Infantry spent about a month in Yosemite and Sequoia. In 1903 and 1904, 9th Cavalry troopers were in the parks for the entire summer, leaving from San Francisco in 1903 and from the Presidio of Monterey the following year.

The Route to the Parks

Troops typically left for the parks in May and returned in November. For each park, some 100 troopers and their officers paraded on horseback through San Francisco, followed by mules and wagons. The journey would take them down historic El Camino Real and across the Diablo Range to the San Joaquin Valley and Sierra Nevada. The soldiers traveled about 280 miles over 13 days to get to Yosemite and 320 miles over 16 days to get to Sequoia. They camped near racetracks, roadhouses, and rivers. If they had leisure time, they patronized restaurants and saloons.

Apart from San Francisco and San Jose, northern California at this time was predominantly rural. The Santa Clara and San Joaquin valleys began as centers of Native American populations, and then experienced waves of Spanish settlement, the boom of the Gold Rush, and the growth of agriculture.

Meeting Locals

The Army’s arrival in town drew attention, and the years of the Buffalo Soldiers were no exception. In some communities, the very concept of the national parks was as foreign as the presence of the troopers themselves. However, despite any praise in print for the “heroes of San Juan Hill,” residents did not always transcend their personal prejudices. The Buffalo Soldiers could expect to face discrimination, independent of their military status.

Nonetheless, the soldiers made an impression that lasted beyond their brief stay. In December 1903, Captain (later Colonel) Charles Young spoke at an assembly at Stanford University. Young was the third African American to graduate from West Point and the highest ranking black officer in the Army at the time. He had traveled in the vicinity of the university earlier that year, en route to Sequoia with the 9th Cavalry. His speech implored the students to extend “the white man’s chance” for education to African Americans.

How does the Buffalo Soldiers’ California compare to the contemporary landscape? For the Santa Clara Valley portion of the route, stops that were once small, isolated towns are now full-fledged cities with barely discernible borders. Today’s Silicon Valley is a site of freeways and sprawl, technology booms and busts, and populations growing rapidly in number and diversity. However, the continued use of El Camino Real and the intact vistas of the mountains and foothills maintain a link to the past.

Part of the soldiers’ trail is now the San Luis Reservoir. Otherwise, the rest of their route has not changed as radically. The San Joaquin Valley remains the agricultural heart of the state, though it has witnessed significant development of its urban areas. The vastness of this landscape is just as the Buffalo Soldiers experienced it over a hundred years ago, conveying a sense of history and place.

The trail approximates historic El Camino Real from San Francisco to Gilroy, CA-152 E to Dos Palos, CA-33 S to Firebaugh, and rural roads to Madera. At Madera, the route forked: troops destined for Yosemite headed through Raymond and along what is now CA-41 N, entering the park at Wawona. Those bound for Sequoia followed today’s CA-99 S and CA-198 E toward the Ash Mountain Entrance.

For additional African American military history in California, visit Colonel Allensworth State Historic Park.

Presidio of San Francisco
223 Halleck Street
Presidio of San Francisco, CA 94129
www.nps.gov/prsf

Yosemite National Park
P.O. Box 577
Yosemite, CA 95389-0577
www.nps.gov/yose

Sequoia/Kings Canyon National Park
47050 Generals Highway
Three Rivers, CA 93271-9700
www.nps.gov/seki

9th Cavalry Guidon.

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Buffalo Soldiers



For 218 years, the Presidio served as an army post under Spanish, Mexican, and U.S. rule, during which its grounds were transformed from mostly empty windswept dunes and scrub to a verdant, preeminent military installation.

Life on the Post

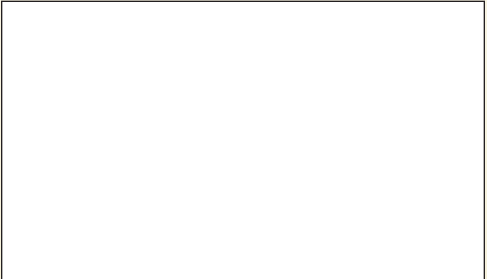
All four Buffalo Soldier regiments passed through the Presidio during the Philippine Insurrection. 9th Cavalry troops remained at the post until 1904—the first African American units to be part of the regular garrison. Garrison duty consisted of routine activities like work details and guard mount. The soldiers’ field days and mock battles drew crowds of civilian spectators. Sports, including football and the ever popular baseball, were common recreations, and the 9th Cavalry baseball team was called the San Juans.

In the City

A soldier’s life often included a dose of San Francisco culture. The Buffalo Soldiers socialized with the small but closely knit African American community. For nightlife, troopers commonly frequented the dancehalls and saloons along Pacific Avenue, the epicenter of the city’s infamous Barbary Coast. However, even in the popular black nightclubs, Buffalo Soldiers fell under additional scrutiny. Fights were a nightly phenomenon on the Barbary Coast, but the reporting of incidents involving African American soldiers tended to stereotype them as armed and dangerous.

Confrontations Among Soldiers

Conflicts among soldiers were not uncommon at the time, and racial tension was a part of the scene. Newspapers reported incidents including a streetcar brawl and fights that resulted in police intervention.



Headline from the *San Francisco Call*, March 27, 1901.

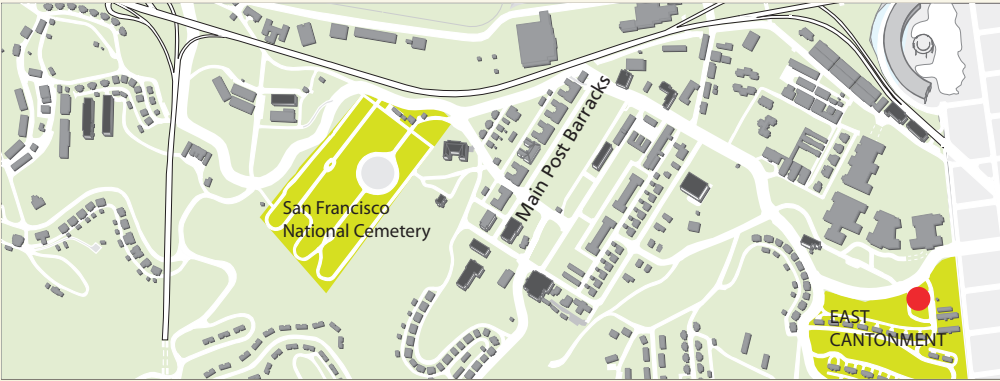


Booker T. Washington & Theodore Roosevelt

In 1903, Buffalo Soldiers figured into the California visits of two prominent Americans. In January, Booker T. Washington addressed the soldiers at the Presidio, reminding them that they were not only fighters, but also role models and cultural ambassadors. In May, President Theodore Roosevelt visited San Francisco. Two troops of the 9th Cavalry led by Captain Charles Young served as the President’s Escort of Honor, accompanying him on horseback through the city. This was the first time African American troops were given this honorable role.

Legacy at the Presidio

Today, the San Francisco National Cemetery is the final resting place of 450 Buffalo Soldiers. The headstones overlooking the Golden Gate are quiet reminders of the sacrifices and lasting contributions made by African Americans, both to the parks and to American history.



Above: President Roosevelt’s 9th Cavalry Honor Guard, Presidio Golf Links, 1903. NPS, Golden Gate National Recreation Area Park Archives

Map: Buffalo Soldiers stayed in the East Cantonment in transit to and from the Philippines. Troops on garrison duty lived in barracks on the Main Post and ran exercises on the Presidio Golf Course. Today, one can visit the National Cemetery and a Buffalo Soldiers exhibit at Fort Point.

Yosemite National Park



Members of Troops C and D, 9th Cavalry on the Fallen Monarch, 1904. NPS, Yosemite Research Library

The sublime beauty of Yosemite’s waterfalls, cliffs, meadows, and groves makes the park one of the most scenic places in the world. After Yosemite National Park was created on October 1, 1890, the Army administered the park from headquarters in Camp A. E. Wood in Wawona.

Lost History

The first Buffalo Soldiers in the parks were from the 24th Infantry; they served in 1899 and were the only infantry regiment to ever do so. The troopers spent a month in Yosemite and Sequoia before they were relieved by other units. Apart from one evocative photograph of the 24th Infantry in Yosemite, no information on their experience in the parks remains.

Patrolling the Park

In the summer of 1903, Troops K and L of the 9th Cavalry cared for Yosemite National Park. These were the first to establish permanent outposts instead of continuously patrolling the park. The soldiers removed sheep and cattle brought to the park to graze, stocked fish in the lakes and streams, and cleared overgrown trails. In 1904, the 9th Cavalry returned to Yosemite, with similar tasks and an additional botanical project: in Wawona, the troopers began work on an arboretum, now considered the first museum in a national park.

Roosevelt & Muir Visit Yosemite

After Theodore Roosevelt’s visit to San Francisco in May 1903, his next stop was Yosemite, where he toured the valley and camped with naturalist John Muir. During this historic meeting of the minds, 9th Cavalry troops acted as the President’s escort, guarding him as he slept beneath the sequoias.

Protecting the National Park Idea

Much was at stake for the Buffalo Soldiers. Many Californians, influenced by Manifest Destiny, were focused on settlement and expansion. To them, the concept of a national park appeared impractical, and the benefits of preserving such a large tract of land were not self-evident. Thus, when soldiers guarded the parks they were not only protecting the land, but also upholding an idea. Meanwhile, the Buffalo Soldiers were placed in a situation in which the authority inherent to their uniforms could be undermined by racism. When they confronted white stockmen about trespassing livestock or seized weapons from potential poachers, race complicated the situation.



Cavalry troops posed for photographs on the Fallen Monarch in Mariposa Grove. The Army’s early headquarters Camp A. E. Wood and the arboretum were located in Wawona near today’s Wawona Campground. The Buffalo Soldiers’ patrol posts lie inside and outside current park boundaries.

Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks

Created on September 25, 1890, Sequoia National Park is our nation’s second national park. Today, it and adjacent Kings Canyon National Park protect nearly half the remaining “Big Tree” groves in the world.

Of the three times the Buffalo Soldiers were in Sequoia, one year stands out. In May 1903, Captain Charles Young led Troops I and M of the 9th Cavalry to Sequoia and the precursor to Kings Canyon, General Grant National Park. It marked the first time a black officer served as Acting Superintendent of a national park.

Constructing Trails & Roads

Among Young’s tasks was making the park more accessible. Under his supervision, Buffalo Soldiers constructed a trail to the top of Mount Whitney, and a hired crew finished the first wagon road to Giant Forest. The Army had worked on the road every summer, but

improvements had lagged. Young’s men built more road than in the last three years combined. This was also a diplomatic accomplishment given that a white crew completed the project while taking orders from African Americans. Upon completion of the road, nearby communities rejoiced, and Young held a celebration for his soldiers and honored guests that included a grand feast, toasts, and musical entertainment.

The Booker T. Washington Tree

Appreciative visitors and workmen requested that a sequoia be named after Young. The captain declined and compromised by dedicating a tree to, in his words, “that great and good American, Booker T. Washington.” Over the century, that tree had been lost to history. It was reidentified in 2001 and rededicated in 2003, during the centennial celebration of Young’s superintendency.

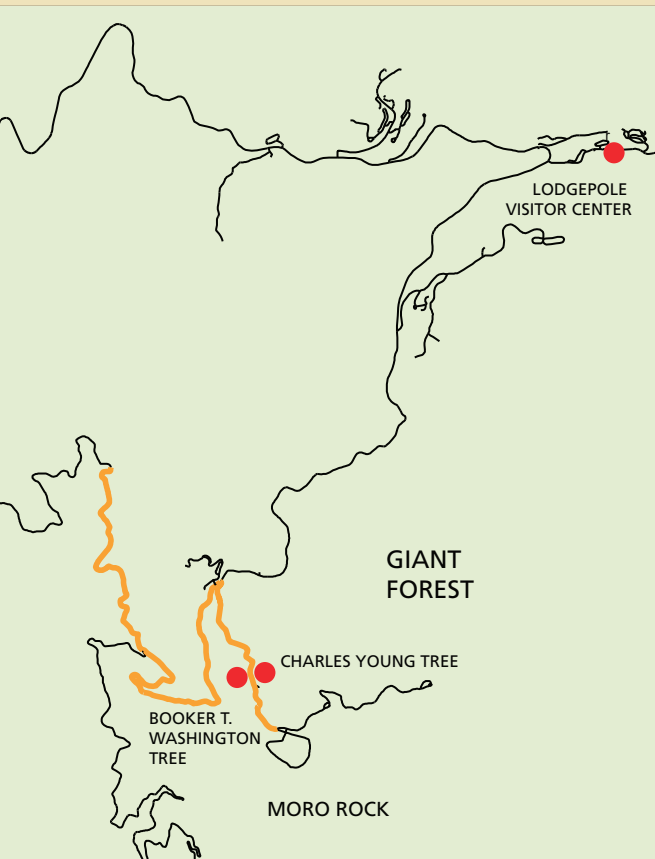
Envisioning the Park’s Future

Young also advocated for the park to acquire the privately-owned lands within its boundaries for the sake of protecting the forest. He negotiated options for the government to purchase all of the properties at reasonable rates. This is another diplomatic accomplishment that makes that summer an unprecedented example of leadership. The Buffalo Soldiers’ impact on the parks is reflected not only in their regular patrol responsibilities, but also the singular vision and drive of Charles Young.

Although troops of the 9th Cavalry went to Sequoia and General Grant for the following summer, Young never returned to the parks. He would reflect on that summer as a time from which he emerged “a different man with a better outlook.” In honor of Young and the Buffalo Soldiers, the Colonel Charles Young Tree was dedicated in 2004.



Portrait of Charles Young. NPS, Sequoia National Park Archives.



Left: The Booker T. Washington Tree and Colonel Charles Young Tree are in Giant Forest along Moro Rock Road. The 1903 wagon road is now sections of Crystal Cave Road, Generals Highway, and Moro Rock Road. Lodgepole Visitor Center includes a Buffalo Soldiers display.